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ABSTRACT

The 29th in the National Center for Early Development & Learning's (NCEDL) "Spotlight" series, this report is based on a technical report available online, and summarizes findings of a study analyzing the change strategies used in the development of pre-kindergarten programs for 4-year-olds in the states of Georgia, Illinois, New York, South Carolina, and Texas. Key figures in political and educational circles were interviewed to determine the major facilitators to the policy shift, the barriers to be overcome, and strategies used to make the policy shift. The findings indicated major differences among the five states related to financial support, a gradual versus sudden program establishment, and the organizational support systems available. Commonalities among the five states included significant political leadership, early school failure as a key reason for program initiation, embedding the pre-K program into a larger package of educational reform, considerable effort to convince child care providers and Head Start that the pre-K program would not harm their interests, the significant media role, the lack of a visible role for higher education, and the role of political forces and professional education and child care groups in developing program strategies. Advice to states wishing to begin or extend pre-K programs relates to linkages to larger educational reform, the importance of early childhood, political leadership and support, funding sources, transportation, infrastructure data systems, program quality assurance, collaboration with stakeholders, and other social movements adding support to the policy changes. (KB)

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1

NCEDL Spotlights

No. 29 December 2000

# Pre-K initiatives in five states

*The following is based on a 100-page technical report—*Education for four-year olds: State initiatives*—by James J. Gallagher, Jenna R. Clayton and Sarah E. Heinemeier of NCEDL. The complete report and an executive summary are available online.*

## How five states are implementing pre-K programs

### Structure of study

A major educational shift in the past five years has been the move by many states to establish a pre-kindergarten program for four-year-olds. This study involves Georgia, Illinois, New York, South Carolina and Texas, which were found to be making substantial progress in developing their pre-K programs.

Key figures in political and educational circles were interviewed to determine the major facilitators to this policy shift, the barriers to be overcome, and strategies used to make this policy shift.

These states appear to be well on the way to universal pre-K services as soon as they find a way to finance the programs. Public schools in these states have accepted yet another responsibility, and this educational reform movement for young children continues.

### Major differences among the five

**Finance:** Georgia established a lottery with the proceeds earmarked for the program. In Texas, the program has been in place so long that is now part of the state's continuing budget. In Illinois, the program budget has to be considered anew each year. In New York, the universal pre-K is on a five-year phase-in process. South Carolina raised the state sales tax a penny to pay for this and other education reforms.

**Gradual versus sudden:** Illinois and Texas each had a gradually developing and expanding program. Georgia established its universal program in a very short time. The gradual approach allowed states to reach agreements with the various professional groups and get the public accustomed to the program. On the other hand, the passage of time lets opposition coalesce and build their case.

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### Generalities from the five states

**Political leadership:** In South Carolina and Georgia, the governor spearheaded this effort. In New York, the influential speaker of the assembly was the major force behind the program. In Texas, a special study commission appointed by the governor and headed by Ross Perot provided the impetus. In Illinois, a number of key legislators played an important role and were helped by key advocacy groups. In each case, powerful political figures lead the way.

**Early school failures:** In each state, a key reason for initiating the program was that a number of children in that state were identified as failing in the early grades. The prospect of continued poor school performance and possible later dependence on the larger society was a motivating force in identifying such children early and providing a stimulating pre-K program.

**Reform packages:** One political strategy used in each state was embedding the pre-K program in a larger package of educational reform.

**Professional and political leaders:** Professional child care providers and Head Start teachers had to be convinced that no harm would come to them or their interests. Considerable effort was expended to make sure that these groups supported the new policy.

**Other commonalties:**

- The media made an insignificant impact in these states.
- There was no visible role for higher education in the decision.
- Basically, the program strategies seemed to be worked out by the political forces and professional education and child care groups.

The general public seemed moderately positive towards the move. There were few instances of general public endorsement or protest, with the exception of some on the Christian right who believed the program undermined family values and that the child was better off with his/her mother than with a teacher or child care worker.

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## Advice to states wishing to begin or extend pre-K

**Link with larger educational reform:** These five states found it useful to embed the four-year-old program in a larger package of education reform. This appeared to divert criticism or opposition and to mute the perception of the costs of the program. In some cases, the pre-K program was linked with raises in teachers' salaries. In others, it joined hands with increases in technology and other education initiatives.

**Importance of early childhood:** Most states began the pre-K program with vulnerable populations, children at risk for school failure. Once the benefits for at-risk children had been noted, it was natural for parents of children not at risk to wonder why their children weren't receiving these services.

**Political leadership and support:** Since such pre-K programs cost considerable money (though saving money in the long run), it was important that key political leaders directly support the program. It is also wise to make the support bipartisan, if at all possible.

**Funding sources:** Unless a source is available that would not stress other state budget considerations, there is a tendency to introduce the idea and program gradually.

**Transportation:** One factor often overlooked in the planning has been transportation. While public schools accept responsibility for transportation, this has been left out of pre-K planning in some instances.

**Infrastructure data systems:** A natural step in policy development is to assure that direct services to children are taken care of, but to overlook the support structure that is so important to a quality program. A good example is the lack of a data system. Without such a system, state planners are in the dark when it comes to needed resources and legislators are in the dark about the viability of the requests being made.

**Program quality assurance:** Establishing standards such as certification of key staff members and developing technical assistance personnel to improve the overall quality of the program are two strategies that support high quality pre-K programs. Such standards result in greater public support and acceptance for the overall program.

**Collaboration with stakeholders:** The successful programs took pains to allay the natural anxieties of child care service providers. The perception that two or three institutions will fight over who will care for four-year-olds can bring forth political opposition. All five states encouraged various efforts to bring about collaboration among these stakeholders.

**Other forces at work:** Two other social movements added support to these policy changes. The large percentage of mothers in the workforce and requirements that welfare mothers go to work left parents searching for constructive environments for their young children.

### Major differences

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**Organizational support systems:** States either set up a separate office or maintained an identifiable unit in the state department of education to administer the program. The structures varied considerably from a near one-person early childhood department (Texas and New York) to Georgia's separate Office of School Readiness, which is well funded and well staffed. Some states like South Carolina allow much more flexibility at the local level on the nature of the program and staffing.

### If you want to know more:


- Gallagher, J., Clayton, J. & Heinemeier, S. (2001). *Education for four-year-olds: State Initiatives.* Chapel Hill: NCEDL online. Technical report available at www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/EDFours-tr.pdf, executive summary at www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/EDFours-es.pdf
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- Gallagher, J., Rooney, R. & Campbell, S. (1999). Child care licensing regulations and child care quality in four states. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly 14,* #3, 313-333.
- Helburn, S.W. (Ed.). (1995). *Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes in child care centers,* Technical report of the Cost, Quality, and Child Outcome Study Team. Denver: University of Colorado at Denver.


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